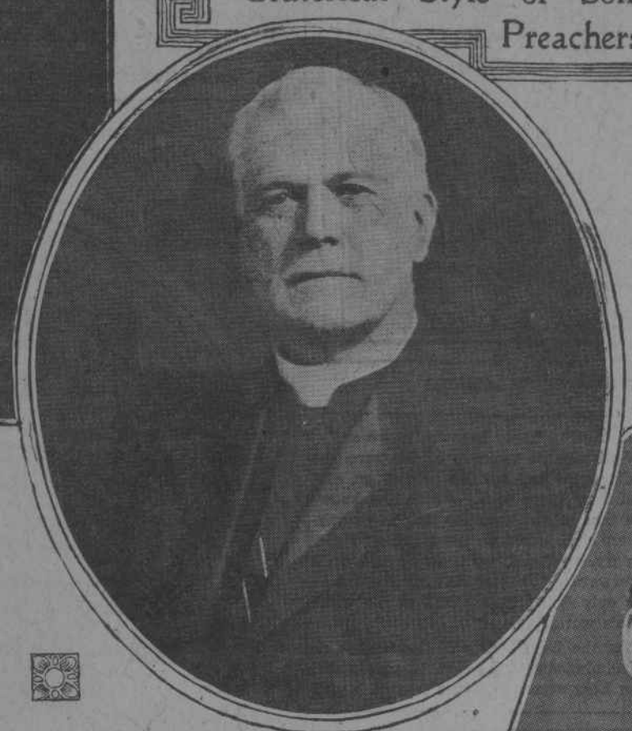
IS PULPIT ORATORY DECLINING?

After Listening to Numerous New York Ministers, Grenville Kleiser Believes the Impression That Present Day Ministers Are Less Accomplished Speakers Than a Generation Ago Is Incorrect—Critical Study of the Oratorical Style of Some Well Known Preachers

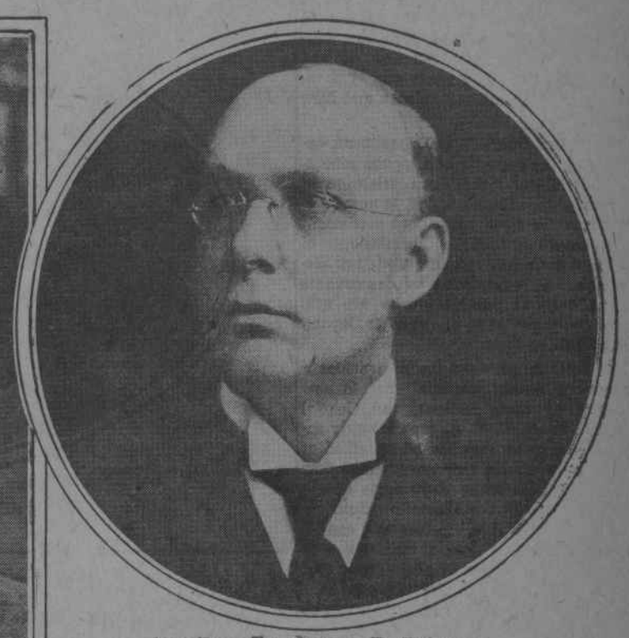
The Rev. Dr. William T. Manning
Photo by Gessford



The Rev. Father H. A. Brann.
Photo by Pach Bros.

The Rev. Dr. I. M. Haldeman
Photo by Aime Dupont

The Rev. Dr. Robert Stuart MacArthur
Photo by Pach Bros.



The Rev. Dr. George P. Eckman
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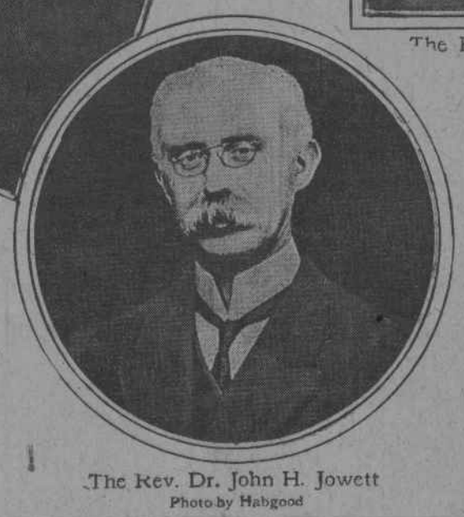

The Rev. Dr. John H. Jowett
Photo by Habgood

BY GRENVILLE KLEISER.

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A GENERAL impression prevails in America that pulpit oratory has declined. The lack of oratorical power and effectiveness in the pulpit has been ascribed to the fact that many preachers nowadays must devote much of their time to the administration and organization of the church work, so that the sermon must often necessarily be a half digested and perfunctory effort.

Why should a sermon be less effective than a political speech? The public speaker knows that if he does not say something interesting at the end of ten minutes his hearers will cough, move about uneasily, look at their watches and finally walk out. It is true that some men utterly lack the gift of interesting others, but unless they can acquire this gift they are foredoomed to failure as public leaders.

The preacher himself must be interested in his theme. It is an ancient oratorical maxim that no speaker can hope to move others until he himself is moved. Doubtless many preachers have not seriously enough considered the importance of delivery as part of their great work. Until recently few theological seminaries regarded the study of pulpit delivery as other than a fine art, a course of instruction to be taken, like dancing or fencing lessons, at the caprice of the student. Happily, however, along with the general movement toward a higher standard of efficiency in oral English, has come a realization that men who are in future to occupy our pulpits must be thoroughly trained in public speaking.

Whatever may be said about the decrease in church attendance, there are still many thousands of men and women desirous of hearing good preachers and eloquent sermons. This was attested recently by a visit to some of the leading churches in New York city. In every case they were filled to their utmost capacity with intelligent, attentive and prosperous looking people.

A Baptist Orator.

At Calvary Baptist Church, in West Fifty-seventh street, Robert Stuart MacArthur, until recently, preached twice every Sunday to a large congregation. The first thing that impressed you about him was his supreme self-confidence—one of the essentials of great oratory. He begins his discourse rather deliberately but loses little time in getting into action. Arms, body, head and facial expression come almost immediately into play, and you realize that a trained speaker is addressing you. The voice is full, deep, resonant and of wide compass. Each word is so distinctly enunciated that you are reminded of the admonition to make your words "like newly made coins dropped from the mint." Dr. MacArthur has a peculiar habit of often holding tenaciously to long vowel sounds, sometimes sending a single sound several times around the auditorium. At first it startles you, but soon you grow to like it.

His style of speaking is extemporaneous and inspirational. The gesture is unusually graceful and always appropriate. The speaker takes you into his confidence and talks to you in plain, direct style. Then, suddenly, a word pierces the air like a pistol shot, your ear is arrested, while the speaker sends forth a flood of sound, all the while gesticulating fervently and dramatically, his body moving and undulating in perfect response to his thought and feeling. In the ecstacy and vehemence of his utterance at one moment his head almost touches the pulpit, and at the next it is thrown suddenly up and back, while a stream of moving eloquence is poured out with lavish prodigality. Yet through it all there is no ranting, no declamation, no empty rhetoric—it is a soul on fire!

In a single discourse Dr. MacArthur runs the entire gamut of human feeling. He speaks fearlessly, yet kindly. He speaks of so-called New Thought, and with a slight note of contempt says, "These 'isms,' with their quarrelling women and silly witchcraft and their sillier science!" With all his self-confidence he says modestly, "I have been speaking in public for forty-four years about the loving kindness of God, and I have not yet learned the alphabet." He says admonishingly, "Any man or woman in this audience who stays away from God should be ashamed of himself or herself!" In a voice of unusual tenderness he says, "The whole world is a whispering gallery to a child of God," and then with a gesture of despair he adds, "Oh, the folly of young men and women who loaf in a boarding house instead of being in a pew in God's house!"

Take No Note of Time.

So the great preacher continues with gradually increasing intensity. He speaks for something more than half an hour, but you take no note of time. The light and shade of feeling, the vocal perspective, the graceful and animated gesture charm you, and as he approaches the climax of his sermon, rising to heights of impassioned eloquence, you, too, feel thrilled and inspired. A sharp note of warning, a pathetic ring to the voice, a clarion call to righteousness and the speaker is done.

It was said of Pitt that he no sooner rose than he carried away every hearer and kept the attention fixed and unflagging until it pleased him to let it go. A like tribute can be paid to the preaching style of the Rev. William T. Manning, of Trinity Episcopal Church. His power of compelling attention, however, is not due to an unbroken flow of words, but to an unusual deliberateness of utterance punctuated by many eloquent and significant pauses.

As he stands to preach he looks at his congregation for some moments before he utters a single sound. Then, with measured precision, he announces his text and again pauses long. Having now secured the attention of all his hearers he proceeds with his discourse in a manner at once simple, direct and deliberate. Although the message itself may be simple, the clean cut diction and reserve force of the speaker invest it with a peculiar charm and power.

The Art of Pausing.

Dr. Manning's delivery is a study in the fine art of pausing. It is easy to see that he has accustomed himself to explain and prove, to clear away objections and to apply what he says to the practical, everyday needs of men. His entire manner of speaking, indeed, is that of an earnest man speaking to other men. The style is wholly extempore, which enables him constantly to look into the eyes of his hearers. The marked deliberateness of delivery and the long but judicious pauses come at last to fascinate the hearer's attention. The speaker is natural from the beginning to the end of his sermon, with not the slightest attempt at oratorical effect.

Dr. Manning uses very little gesture, but what he does use is significant and unobtrusive. He is particularly fond of a right hand movement, a turning at the wrist, which serves to emphasize and illustrate some special point. All of his gestures are very deliberate, in keeping with the movement of his mind and voice.

What he has to say is in plain, straightforward language. He speaks of the duties of ministers of Christ and what they are appointed to do for Christ's people. He sets a high ideal for the minister when he says, "The office is a threefold one, and the Prayer Book expresses it in three beautiful and significant words—messengers, watchmen, stewards of the Lord."

He proceeds:—"They are to be faithful messengers—that is, men intrusted with a definite message which they are to deliver. They are not to use the pulpit for the dissemination of their own private views or individual theories or personal speculations, but to deliver the message revealed of God and intrusted to them." "Of course the message," he continues, "must be their own in the sense that they themselves have felt the truth of it. They must be able to deliver it in their own way, with personal force and power, because it has laid hold upon their own souls, minds and spirits." Then, with increasing animation, he says:—"Nothing in this world can possibly be more pitiable or more morally shocking than the case of a priest in God's church who shall use the pulpit that the church gives him and abuse the confidence which she places in him by contradicting her or in any way seeming to contradict the message which the church trusts him to deliver."

There is a note of gentle frankness when he says:—"It is not the business of the minister to try to please you, or to be popular with you, or even to try to win your affections; though where duty is faithfully done this may be given by faithful souls."

An Earnest Conclusion.

"The steward is a man who is intrusted with a charge, with things not his own—a man who represents another and acts for another. And so it is with the priesthood. The clergy are to stand in relation to Christ and to you, in that holy relation of priesthood which the Prayer Book so fully and constantly emphasizes. Earnestly and helpfully they are to exercise all the powers of the office to speak the word of Christ in God's name."

The speaker ends as he began, simply, deliberately and earnestly, while all unconsciously to himself he leaves the impression upon you that he is indeed a living exemplification of the ideal minister of Christ whom he has been so eloquently describing.

About ten years ago the Rev. J. H. Jowett, now pastor of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, speaking on "The Secrets of Effective Preaching" before a body of divinity students at Cardiff, Wales, said:—"Months ago I determined that there should be more of the tender lover in my pulpit speech, more of the wooing note of the Apostle Paul, more of the gentleness and tender constraint of my Lord." In these words we have the real secret of Dr. Jowett's own wonderful hold upon his hearers—the wooing tone of his pulpit style.

The voice of Dr. Jowett almost throughout his entire discourse is that of quiet, frank, direct conversation. The style is characterized by extreme gentleness. There is a sense of expectancy pervading the congregation as he rises to speak, so that even though the opening words are uttered in an extremely subdued tone not a syllable is lost to the hearer. This audibility is due also to the unusual purity of the speaker's voice, combined with a distinct and accurate enunciation for which some English clergymen are distinguished.

Dr. Jowett utters several phrases very rapidly, so rapidly, indeed, that you must heed him closely, and then he suddenly changes to the opposite extreme of marked deliberateness. He often pauses long, as if pondering his next thought. He uses notes so sparingly that his freedom of action and utterance is untrammeled.

In appearance he is tall, erect, slight of stature and exceedingly flexible and forceful in his bodily movements. Gesture he employs quite frequently, now weighing his thought in the palm of his hand, changing easily and appropriately from one gesture to another and pointing his finger at his hearers by way of explanation, emphasis or admonition.

Only rarely does Dr. Jowett's voice ring out in all its fulness, and then it serves to enforce his message with unusual effectiveness. The intellectual note predominates. The close of his sermon, like the beginning, is gentle and moving. The final words are barely above a whisper, yet every ear is bent to catch these last tones of the speaker's beautifully modulated voice. The sermon does not end but dies away like a breeze of early spring.

A Catholic Orator.

Remarkable for its extreme simplicity and gentleness of voice and manner is the pulpit style of Father H. A. Brann, of St. Agnes' Roman Catholic Church, in East Forty-third street. It may be said of him, as it was said of Wendell Phillips, it is "simple colloquy—a gentleman conversing." The force of his personality is so great that you overlook the fact that he is short of stature. He wins and holds your attention from the moment he enters the pulpit.

Although Father Brann's style is mainly conversational, it assumes an elevated form as he progresses into his subject. Once embarked upon his theme he becomes intensely in earnest, and his full, resonant voice rings out like the huge bell of an abbey, while with searching emphasis and appropriate gesture he sends forth his message with telling power.

Father Brann believes that a preacher should be thoroughly well prepared whether he speaks with or without a manuscript. "There are two kinds of preparation necessary for the preacher," he has said, "the remote, representing his constant study, since he must be a man of learning, a student of the best literature, including a profound study of theology, and the proximate, or the special study of the subject on which he is to speak."

When words flow too readily from a speaker's lips the effect may be monotonous and soporific, but not so with Father Braun. He sometimes hesitates in the choice of a word, unconsciously imitating Disraeli in this respect, so that he impresses you as a speaker who is really "thinking on his feet." Dr. Brann is not only a gifted pulpit orator, but he is also a splendid illustration of what a speaker may achieve by a method at once simple, sincere and conversational.

The impression made by the Rev. George P. Eckman, pastor of St. Paul's Methodist Episcopal Church, West End avenue, is that of a pulpit orator with immense power in reserve. His voice is deep and melodious and even upon its lowest notes is clear as a bell. There is no effort, no straining after effect, no florid rhetoric, no vehemence, and yet there is a blood streak of earnestness and conviction which is unmistakable.

He speaks without notes of any kind, and since he is master of himself he soon masters you. He is like a machine in the best running order, with all the parts in perfect adjustment, just as Henry Ward Beecher affirmed the preacher should be. Dr. Eckman speaks directly to his hearers, now pointing a finger of warning and with his body shaking with emotion, now in repose with hands folded upon the Bible. In the more intense parts of his sermon he uses to great advantage a guttural voice, rolls his r's repeatedly and often suggests the dramatic. It is all, however, so easy and natural that you feel the speaker could by no possibility exhaust his splendid resources.

Occasionally Dr. Eckman steps from behind the pulpit, and then you obtain an adequate impression of his tall figure and immense power. He seems to want to get near to you when he lifts a small Bible on high and exclaims, "Take up this old Book and see how these prophets twisted their brains and bankrupted their rhetoric to show that God is a fountain, a rock, a tower!" And again, "Anything you want you can find in God—anything!" Then follows his definition of a Christian:—"A Christian is the man whose step should be more elastic, whose face should be more radiant, whose manner should be more majestic, than any other man on the face of the globe."

It has well been said that the secret of great oratory does not lie in saying new things, but in saying things with such power as to move men to action. Dr. Eckman appeals to the finest susceptibilities of men's natures, and by his active sympathy and personal predominance compels the attention of his hearers.

Dr. I. M. Haldeman, of the First Baptist Church, Broadway and Seventy-ninth street, does not leave you long in doubt as to his oratorical ability. Like the true orator that he is, having read his text from the Bible, he steps at once from the reading stand, clasps his hands behind his back, his spine straight as a rod, and begins to speak rapidly. The style is plain, conversational, man to man talking.

You soon observe that he is a logical and argumentative speaker. He proceeds to divide his subject into so many parts and frankly tells you what he intends to discuss and what he intends to prove. His clear and straightforward introduction gains your complete confidence, and from the beginning to the very end of his sermon the attention of every one of his hearers is riveted upon the speaker. All have evidently come in eager anticipation of hearing something intellectual, and none will be disappointed.

The voice is above middle key, and there is at first little suggestion of the power hidden away in that mysterious and wonderful instrument, for the speaker chooses to speak in rather a light quality of tone, though so rich and sympathetic that you instinctively feel it is the voice of one who has suffered and knows.

Fluency of Words.

He has been speaking but a few minutes when you begin to realize the speaker's astonishing fluency of words. Each word is sharply enunciated—almost clipped—so that despite the unusual rapidity of utterance you do not miss a single syllable. Soon the preacher is away, barely stopping for breath, while the flow of words continues in a silvery stream of eloquence. Every eye is fixed upon him, and you feel you cannot turn aside for an instant without suffering loss.

The speaker shows no mercy to eye or ear—the magic music of his language continues unabated. The dynamic force of the man communicates itself to every hearer and an electric current is felt to be hard at work. Yet this cascade, this Niagara of eloquent words, goes on and on, now at railway speed, now at eagle's wing, not a single word out of place, all fitting compactly together and all the time with accelerated speed. Phillips Brooks spoke at the rate of three hundred words a minute, but you cannot count the words of this speaker! He outstrips the wind! It is velocity of speech at its maximum!

Yet through all this rapid speaking there is the true and graceful gesture, single hand, double hand, index finger, curve, straight line, supine, prone, vertical, clenched fist, admonishing, supplicating, threatening, inviting. And what a right hand, with its flexibility of wrist and fingers, expressive and eloquent beyond description!

These are characteristic expressions and sayings of his:—"Now you are thinking with me, are you?" "But, sirs, mark me." "The hell that has spilled itself over in New York." "Interrogation marks stab you to the heart." "It is enough to make the bottomless pit laugh." "You might as well look into the crater of hell as to look into your own soul for inspiration." "Love that cannot ache, love that cannot bear sorrow in its innermost depths is not love." "They say the Bible (and let me whisper it to you—which is the 'best seller' on the earth to-day)—the Bible, they say, is antiquated."

The close of Dr. Haldeman's sermon reminds you of a great cathedral organ—it ends like a "grand amen." As you sit spellbound and before you realize that he has finished his hand is raised in benediction.

Little Stories Here and There.

IT was told at luncheon at the Lawyers' Club the day before the Equitable Building burned down. A group of legal luminaries were gathered about a table discussing the apparent impossibility of insuring the honesty of any man, and it was contended that there was no remedy for it save to pick out your man and trust him absolutely. No matter what safeguards you might hedge him about with, if he was dishonest he would contrive to cheat somehow. One of the lawyers told this story to emphasize his point.

A client went into a lawyer's office in Fulton street and said that he had a grievance with his neighbor and wanted to go to law. He stated all the circumstances of the case and counsel listened attentively. The case fully stated, the client asked:—

"Well, those are the facts. Do you think I'm in the right safe enough to win if I go to law with him?"

"If the facts are as stated you certainly have got a case. If I were in your case I should begin suit," answered the lawyer.

"And how much would your fee be for taking the case and pushing it clear through?"

"Oh, I'll see it through for you for a hundred dollars."

The shrewd client produced from an inside pocket a well worn wallet, from which he extracted a roll of bills and peeled off one hundred dollars.

"There," said he, "that's yours. It's your fee. That's all you'd get if you tried the case. Now, without doing any work on it at all, just tell me, honestly, whether I've any chance of winning the case."

HE had been celebrating, not wisely, but too well, and getting obstreperous and noisy and looking for a fight he was tackled by a policeman who in plain clothes was on his way home. The drunken one showed fight and was indignant that an apparently private citizen should try to arrest him.

"Show me your star!" he demanded. "Don't believe you're a cop at all. Won't go with you till I see your star," and he aimed a maudlin blow at the policeman.

There was a scuffle and a fight, short-lived but strenuous, and the drunken man was landed in the police station, where he stayed all night. In the morning it was a dishevelled and torn wreck that appeared before the magistrate and who listened to the policeman relate the trouble he had in getting him to the station house.

"He wanted to fight me all the way to the station, Your Honor. He kept pulling back and trying to trip me and yelling, 'Show me your star! I won't go unless you show me your star.'"

"And," asked the Magistrate gently, "did you show him your star?"

"Your Honor," interrupted the prisoner, "he clouted me on the head and I saw the star—I saw several of them, enough to go around the entire force."

AT the dinner given by the Harper people to Arnold Bennett just before he sailed for England, a dinner which was attended by many of the literary lights that live in or near New York, a discussion came up as to whether in this day of the rapid output of literature a man could live by his books. Mr. Bennett said he was sure that many authors could, and he instanced the case of a young author he knew in London who was so hard up that he could not get enough cash to pay for his dinner.

An idea struck him. He visited his publisher's and there asked for six copies of his latest novel, which was priced at five shillings, ordering that the books be charged to his account. This was done. With the volumes under his arm he visited a second hand book dealer in the neighborhood, and, as the books were perfectly new, he managed to sell the six of them for ten shillings, with which sum he had a rattling good dinner and an evening at the theatre.

"Oh, yes," said Mr. Bennett, "even the humblest author can live by his books—if he has published any books."

WILTON LACKAYE at a recent dinner at the Lambs was rather bored by a pompous layman who ventured in that company of wits to make a speech that was dull and interminable, but perfectly self-possessed, because of the sheer egotism of the speaker. When he got through Lackaye said he would like to tell a story of which he had been reminded by the last speaker. Said he:—"There were two editors of rival papers out in a little town of Illinois and they spent most of their time writing mean squibs about each other. Unfortunately for one of them he one day purchased a mule for his farm, just out of town, whereupon the rival newspaper printed the fact of the purchase as a news item and commented on it as 'An Extraordinary Case of Self-Possession!'"

WILLIE HOPPE, the billiard champion, who has recently taken over the management of a billiard parlor in New York city, tells a good story of a pool game he once played. He says:—"The worst pool table I ever played on was in a little town just outside of St. Louis. The cloth was patchwork, like Joseph's coat of many colors. The cushions were so dead that I think they were stuffed with hay. The table had as many bunkers and hazards in it as a golf course in Scotland, and the colors and the numbers had been beaten off all the balls."

"But how could you play pool," asked a scoffer, "if the balls had no colors and no numbers?"

"Well, you see," replied Hoppe, "I was playing with the proprietor of the place and he knew the different balls by their shapes."

"YOU seem to have a dreadful cold, my dear," said one girl to another as they met on a Broadway street car.

"Yes," answered the first one, furtively using her handkerchief, "it's a Blank's chewing gum cold. Two other girls of my acquaintance have one."

"What in the world is a chewing gum cold?" she was asked.

"Oh, the gum itself hasn't anything to do with it. You see, I was at the theatre last night with Mr. Jones. He, it seems, is madly in love with a girl who makes Blank's chewing gum, and anything that reminds him of her is, I suppose, sacred to him. At any rate, after we came out of the theatre last night we came to one of those big electric signs that keep on changing, advertising everything from automobiles to chocolate drops. I felt Mr. Jones lagging back and asked him what was the matter. In reply he asked me if I'd mind waiting a bit until a certain sign appeared in the electric lights. I couldn't imagine what sign he was waiting for, but, my dear, that lovelorn chap kept me stuck on the cold sidewalk until the sign, 'Chew Blank's Gum—Sweetens the Breath,' flashed several times. Then, with a sigh of beatific satisfaction, he was willing to take me home.

"The worst of it is that this thing's getting to be a habit with Jones, and, as I said, two other girls I know are suffering from severe attacks of influenza because he kept them out in the open, waiting for the sign and to be reminded of his lady love. Lovers are proverbially selfish, though."